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ABSTRACT

This discussion of inclusive education programs for students with disabilities is organized around a series of comments by critics of the trend and responses to these comments by inclusion advocates. Responses are provided to the following criticisms of inclusion: (1) inclusion is a "one size fits all" approach; (2) inclusion does not have positive outcomes for nondisabled students; (3) special education children need specialized services that can only be provided out of the regular classroom; (4) the minority students disproportionately placed in special education are there voluntarily so such placement is not a civil rights matter; (5) teachers are unprepared to teach in an inclusive education classroom; (6) teachers should not be required to have children with disabilities in their classroom; (7) extra financial support is likely to erode after an inclusive program has been initiated; (8) special education students cannot be helped by a "broken" regular system; (9) the law's requirements concerning "least restrictive environment" do not apply to academic learning; (10) only ideologically driven professionals and a few parents advocate inclusion; (11) school districts are implementing inclusion to save money; and (12) the "full inclusion" movement is likely to have a profound and destructive effect on public education. (Contains 19 references.) (DB)

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The Graduate School and University Center
The City University of New York

AN INCLUSION TALKBACK: CRITICS' CONCERNS AND ADVOCATES' RESPONSES

Inclusive education programs are developing rapidly in school districts across the country. *The National Study of Inclusive Education* (NCERI, 1995) recently reported on more than nine hundred school districts which are implementing such programs; this is a threefold increase in the number of programs identified in the previous year's study. At the same time, critical comments about inclusion continue to be voiced. In the hope of having a dialogue around those criticisms, they are presented here with responses from advocates of inclusive education.

Critics: Critics claim that inclusion advocates take a "one size fits all" approach.

Advocates: The law is clear in requiring a program designed to meet the individual needs of each child served. School districts effectively implementing inclusive education provide the individualized approach that the law and good educational practice require through the provision of supplemental aids and support services, designed to enable each individual child in an inclusive setting to succeed. When inclusive education is done successfully, it provides a continuum of supports within the general education classroom for all students with disabilities. This last point is supported by a growing body of research which indicates successful inclusive education programs and positive outcomes for all students, those with disabilities and those not.

Critics: Critics claim that inclusive education may have positive social outcomes for students with disabilities, but it does not have positive outcomes for nondisabled students.

Advocates: The law guarantees all children with disabilities an appropriate education in the least restrictive environment and requires that it be in the general education classroom, when that is the appropriate setting for a child. The courts have held that while the consequence for other children is not to be ignored, the standard is very high. In none of the four "full inclusion" circuit court decisions did the courts find that there were harmful effects for the general education students' education. In *Oberti*, 955 F.2d 1204 (3rd Cir.1993), the court described "the reciprocal benefits of inclusion to the nondisabled students in the class" (Id. at 1217) and "found that the nondisabled children will likewise benefit from inclusion" (Id. at 1221-1222). Research documenting positive outcomes for all students is to be found in a growing body of research and reports from school districts implementing inclusive education programs.

Critics: Critics claim that special education children need time with specialists and that this service can only be provided out of the regular classroom. If the students are in an inclusive education setting, the critics assert, the child in need of specialized services will not be able to receive the service out of the classroom.

Advocates: Inclusive education is not a location; it is a model where the child with disabilities is a full member of an age-appropriate general education class in the same way s/he would be were the child not disabled. It does not mean that all services for a child must always take place in a general education classroom. For example, the teaching of Braille or the use of a white cane are essential prerequisites for a blind child to participate fully in the classroom. The "Full Inclusion Taskforce" of the National Federation of the Blind supports the training of blind children in the "tools of blindness" by trained specialists, with the general education teacher trained to reinforce these skills. This same principle applies to students with other disabilities. For specific topics, for limited periods of time, the child (indeed, any child in the class) may receive needed specialized instruction outside of that classroom. Key is that the general education teacher has overall responsibility for all of the child's education and, as appropriate, reinforces that which the specialist provides.

Critics: Critics claim that the large number and disproportionate percentage of minority students being labelled as "disabled" and placed in special education is not a civil rights matter. The comparison of separate special education with racial segregation is inappropriate, they assert, as students in separate placements are there voluntarily.

Advocates: Such arguments ignore the dramatic disproportion of minority students in special education overall, and particularly in those categories that are most separate, producing a form of double segregation. Based on data from 39 states, black students are twice as likely as whites to be in

special education; and while a tenth of the white students have the label "mentally retarded," a quarter of the black students in special education have this label.

Critics: Critics claim that teachers are unprepared to teach in an inclusive education classroom.

Advocates: General educators can develop the desired specialized skills to assist students with disabilities placed in their classrooms. It is essential that college teacher-training programs become more responsive and prepare future teachers to work with diverse student populations in their classrooms. School districts are responsible to upgrade the skills of teachers and to develop programs for all staff, both before inclusive education is initiated and as ongoing professional development. The instructional strategies that are most often reported by teachers and administrators as important to the success of inclusive education programs are those strategies that experienced and qualified teachers use for all children. Among these are cooperative learning, curricular modifications, "hands-on" teaching, whole language instruction, use of peers and "buddies," thematic and multidisciplinary curriculum, use of paraprofessionals/classroom aides, and the use of instructional technology. While teachers report that students with severe acting out behaviors are their greatest challenge, many school districts have initiated successful programs to meet these needs.

Critics: Critics claim that teachers should be allowed to determine whether or not they will have children with disabilities in their classroom and not be required to do so.

Advocates: It is not acceptable for educators to choose which children they will teach in a classroom. Public school systems cannot allow teachers to deny children with disabilities their rights, and, when appropriate, the opportunity to be educated in a general education setting with their peers. To do otherwise would be to violate the law.

Critics: Critics claim that the federal government, the states, and school districts will provide financial and technical support when inclusive education is first initiated and then those supports will erode leaving the school district and the teacher to address the needs of children without adequate support.

Advocate: The lack of ongoing technical and financial supports for inclusive education is a warranted concern that must be met by continuing involvement from parents, teachers, and organizations. School districts report that to implement inclusive education for successful outcomes for all students, school administration must take seriously ongoing staff development and the continuation of supports. Inclusion does not mean "dumping" children in a classroom but building an IEP that will meet the needs of the individual child.

Critics: Critics claim that the entire education system is "broken" and by returning special education students to it, the special education students will receive less than they did in the separate program.

Advocates: Special education students served in separate programs do not realize significant education outcomes. Longitudinal research indicates that outcomes for students in special education programs are limited in terms of student learning, graduation rates, post-secondary education and training, and community living. A critical voice among inclusion advocates is that of adults with disabilities. The individuals believe that segregated programs did not serve their needs and often made them feel inferior, isolated, and different from their peers. They also report that the segregated programs did not prepare them for living a full and productive life after school. If general education is "broken" and special education has not served the needs of its students, then restructuring education into a unitary system will best meet the needs of teachers, students, and parents.

Critics: Critics often construe the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) requirement as related solely to social interaction between disabled students and their nondisabled peers and the law's requirements concerning an "appropriate education" as applicable to academic learning.

Advocates: The law, as the courts have interpreted it, states that both the LRE and the "appropriate education" mandates involve the whole child and the full range of schooling's benefits, academic and social. The law does not require the sacrifice of the one for the other. For example, in *Oberti v. Board of Education of the Borough of Clementon School District*, 995 F.2d 1204 (3rd Cir. 1993), the court addressed the comparison of educational benefits available in a regular class and the benefits of a special education class. The Third Circuit opinion, upholding the parents demand for an inclusive placement stated, "[M]any of the special education techniques used in the segregated class could be successfully imported into a regular class and that the regular teacher could be trained to apply these techniques" (Id. at 1222). In *Sacramento City Unified School District v. Rachel Holland*, 14 F.3d 1398 (9th Cir. 1994), again where the court upheld parents' demand for an inclusive placement over school district opposition, the 9th Circuit found that the goals and objectives of Rachel's IEP could be achieved in the general education class, with curricula modifications and supplementary aids and services.

Critics: Critics claim that inclusion is being advocated only by a few ideologically driven professionals and some emotional parents of students with disabilities.

Advocates: Inclusive education programs are growing rapidly and are taking place in urban, suburban, and rural districts, across the United States. Among these districts, students with all categories of disability, at all levels of severity, and at all grade levels are being educated with successful outcomes. Rather than a few emotional parents requesting inclusive education for their children, there is increased support among parents of children with all categories of disabilities for inclusive opportunities. At the preschool level, this is especially noteworthy, indicated by the growing number of court cases and parent groups that have formed to support inclusion. At nationwide hearings, "a majority of witnesses who testified on the subject of least restrictive environments indicated strong support for integrated placements" (National Council on Disability, 1955). Rather than a few ideologically driven professionals, a growing number of professionals believe that as research continues to document positive outcomes for all students there will be a growing demand by professionals and parents for inclusive education. In light of the prejudice and harmful discrimination that persons with disabilities face in school

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and community, it is a desirable goal in and of itself to integrate all children.

Critics: Critics claim that school districts are implementing inclusive education as a way to save money.

Advocates: Current state funding formulae encourage the placement of students in more rather than less restrictive settings (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). Currently, more than half of the states are reviewing their funding of special education, both to redress this problem and to address other special education funding issues. School districts report that effectively to implement inclusive education the money should follow the children; that is, funds saved from ending the separate systems are used to support an integrated system, one that benefits all of the children. There is substantial evidence that the dual system is profligate of resources—in administrative duplication, in ineffective practices, and in wasteful subsidies of private school placements. Indeed, it is anticipated that over time school districts will save money and better serve all of the children, thereby spending public money more prudently and effectively.

Critics: Critics claim that the full inclusion of students with disabilities is a "movement" that is taking hold very fast and is likely to have a profound and destructive effect on public education.

Advocates: American public education today is faced with many problems. To identify a few: the continuing failure of schools to educate a sizeable percentage of the nation's children results in the loss of support for public education; the sharp cuts in education budgets; the increasing impoverishment of large numbers of the nation's families; the endemic violence, the spread of drugs, pregnancy, and family dissolution that face a growing number of children; and the continuing racism in schools. The present special education system is yet another of the problems. It is not fair, however, to ask students with disabilities to wait until all the other education problems are solved before becoming part of the struggle to bring change to the education system. Perhaps, it is not that inclusion has taken hold very fast, but that school restructuring to meet the needs of all students has moved so slowly.

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